

# APA Study Says: "Who Needs Dad?"

By Dale O'Leary

*Is the nuclear family a social construct, free to be altered at will? Or is there an objective truth about families that is inherent in human nature?*

In the July edition of *The American Psychologist*, Laura Silverstein and Carl Auerbach argue against the traditional view that both fathers and mothers are essential to optimum child development. In "Deconstructing the Essential Father," Silverstein and Auerbach contend that heterosexuality, heterosexual marriage, and the biological family of mother and father are not to be seen as natural.

Both writers are social constructionists, and they hold that the differences between men and women are constructs created by a patriarchal society. Since gender differences are created by oppression, they can and should be eliminated. In fact, the very idea of a "natural" family structure sends up a red flag: for social constructionists, such ideas are called "heterosexism," and they are the very equivalent of racism.

The authors describe the "essentialist" (traditional) position:

The essentialist perspective defines mothering and fathering as distinct social roles that are not interchangeable. Marriage is seen as the social institution within which responsible fathering and positive child adjustment are most likely to occur. Fathers are understood as having a unique and essential role to play in child development, especially for boys who need a male role model in order to establish a masculine gender identity .

They conclude:

From our perspective, the emphasis on the essential importance of fathers and heterosexual marriage...is an attempt to reassert the cultural hegemony of traditional values such as heterocentrism, Judeo-Christian marriage, and male power and privilege.

Our goal, in contrast, is to create an ideology that defines the father-child bond as independent of the father-mother relationship...

We are...interested in encouraging public policy that supports the legitimacy of diverse family structures, rather than policy that privileges the two-parent, heterosexual, married family.

## Broken Families Called "Good"

Those same "multiple and diverse family structures" which

Silverstein and Auerbach praise for challenging the structure of the dominant culture, are in fact what used to be called broken families, in which children are separated from their biological parents. The authors further recommend this economic substitute for fathers: "a comprehensive program of governmental subsidies" so that the taxpayers will be the breadwinners, and fathers can be permanently out of the picture.

One wonders, is social-constructionist research concerned with discovering the truth about human nature? Or could this be a politicization of the authors' personal rage and rebellion into social-science theory, and translated into public policy? Only the nanny state could support a society of such fatherless families.

Given the number of journals willing to publish advocacy studies and the number of institutions willing to hire and promote advocacy researchers, the sheer volume of such research is increasing exponentially.

## Are Lesbians Better Mothers?

Following this line of reasoning, one fast-growing area of research is that of the fitness--even superiority--of lesbians as parents. One such writer, Patterson, has openly stated that researchers should produce a body of research which advocates of homosexual parenting can use in arguing before courts and legislators (1). Patterson has collected a number of studies in which small groups of lesbian mothers were solicited through friendship circles to participate in research to show that they were equally suitable as parents. These women and their children were then interviewed or given questionnaires, and their answers were compared with control groups composed of single mothers.

## A Compromised Peer-Review System?

Belcastro et al (2) reviewed 14 of these studies and found that for the most part, the studies lacked internal and external credibility. In several cases the authors ignored their own data. But this does not deter Patterson and others in the field. The studies are collected and used in legal briefs as proof that children raised by homosexual parents are just as psychologically healthy as though raised by married heterosexual couples, even though the majority of studies compared them to children already in broken homes—that is, children disadvantaged by the absence of a father.

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Unless care is taken to sift through the research and investigate the legitimacy of its claims, courts considering gay adoption and child custody will be presented with false and misleading testimony. Belcastro (1993) concluded his review of the literature on homosexual parenting with the following:

A disturbing revelation was that some of the published works had to disregard their own results in order to conclude that homosexuals were fit parents. We believe that the system of manuscript review by peers, for minimum scientific standards of research, was compromised in several of these studies.

The conclusion that there are no significant differences in children reared by lesbian mothers versus heterosexual mothers is not supported by the published research data base.

### Charley's Foot

Several years ago, I met a 16-year-old boy named Charley, who had lost his foot many years ago in an encounter with a lawn mower. Charley was a great kid--happy, joking, and fully adjusted to his prosthesis. Should Charley's ability to

cope with his traumatic loss lead us to conclude that "One foot is as good as two"? Of course not.

Some children manage to persevere in spite of traumatic disadvantage. Human beings are capable of dealing with many types of adversity. But shouldn't society be constructed in a way that minimizes tragedy, not in a manner that encourages it?

Denying the importance of fatherhood is a sure prescription for disaster. Even now, we are beginning to see the implications of this denial in legal decisions that are based on distorted psychological literature.

### References:

- (1) Patterson, C. and Redding, R. (1996) Lesbian and gay families with stepchildren: Implications of social science research for policy. *J. of Social Issues* 52,3:29-50.
- (2) Belcastro, P., Gramlish, T., Nicholson, T., Price, J., Wilson, R. (1993). A review of data-based studies addressing the effects of homosexual parenting on children's sexual and social functioning. *J. of Divorce and Remarriage* 20, 1/2:105-122.